

South Korea's Stepping Up as an Indo-Pacific Actor

Challenges for the New Yoon Administration

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In his *Foreign Affairs* article titled “South Korea Needs to Step Up,” presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol noted that his vision for the South Korea focuses on expanding capacity and roles of the country in terms of foreign policy and diplomacy beyond the Korean Peninsula to integrate itself into Indo-Pacific collaborative bodies in the theater, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Yoon emphasized a more proactive role for Seoul on the international stage, moving away from strategic ambiguity and toward strengthening the United States–Republic of Korea (US–ROK) alliance. Many voiced hopes for the new administration’s policies, while others remained unconvinced. President Yoon will have to prove his competence through achieving true cooperation among his country’s various political parties, which he promised to do during the campaign, as well as by successfully orchestrating a larger role for South Korea on the international stage.

South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy amid strategic competition between China and the United States and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to face countless challenges across multiple domains. One area that Seoul is most vulnerable to is North Korean denuclearization and reunification of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea poses a direct and imminent military threat to South Korea. Under such circumstance, nuclear proliferation and unification issues have been discussed on various multilateral, unilateral, and bilateral platforms; however, we have yet to see any improvements.

While Washington is weighing a US counterpunch in the case of Pyongyang’s seventh nuclear test and China and Russia vetoing UN Security Council’s additional sanctions on North Korea,¹ Yoon’s hardline approach—relative to the previous Moon administration’s appeasement approach—is carried out through visual expansion of Seoul’s military capabilities and the strengthening of Washington–Seoul ties as seen in the cases of resumption of US–ROK joint military exercises and South Korea’s participation in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2022 exercise.

While modernizing South Korea's military, adapting to potential threats amplified by the use of emerging technologies, gray-zone tactics, and new military campaigns for cyber and space security, Seoul is also promoting defense exports, which are expected to bring in more than USD 10 billion in 2022, just one year after defense exports exceeded imports for the first time.² Ranging from K9 Thunder howitzers to medium-range surface-to-air missiles and from anti-air defense systems to supersonic KF-21 Boramae fighter jets, Seoul is expanding its global network of comprehensive cooperation with countries in all six inhabited continents.³

Moreover, discarding the strategic ambiguity concept, which many observers thought was no longer viable in current geostrategic settings, allows Seoul to focus South Korea's efforts on catching up with other nations in Indo-Pacific networking and strategic cooperation. As seen in the case of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), experts believe that strengthening the US-ROK alliance and joining IPEF is a must in establishing a mid- to long-term geo-economic strategy for Seoul's survival in the changing global market.⁴

With the backdrop of a two-level approach for intertwined Indo-Pacific strategy and national security, both traditional and nontraditional, this special issue of the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* focusing on Korea examines eight issue areas that could pose challenges in South Korea's stepping up. First, Col Michael Edmonston, USAF, provides a unique insight into the potential of Korean unification and unified Korean armed forces from a cultural perspective, working with core concepts of national identities, national values, national security preferences, and unification strategies.

Second, Dr. Jagannath Panda explores Seoul's tilt toward the Indo-Pacific concept, its bilateral connections with the Quad member states, and the future course of Quad-ROK cooperation. Third, Jonathan Corrado delves into the geo-economic aspect of South Korea's semiconductor supply-chain collaboration in the Indo-Pacific, arguing that multilateral cooperation is ultimately the only feasible long-term solution. Fourth, Yoonjin Kim offers valuable insight into the strategic value of water for Yoon's comprehensive security agenda, contending that water security issues are no longer limited to tackling national water supply or sanitation risks but also cover geopolitical concerns as in the case of Mekong River conflicts.

Then, Dr. DongJoon Park offers analysis on South Korea's polarized domestic politics and its impact on Seoul's North Korea policy, carefully predicting that both Koreas are unlikely to be shy in showing their military resolve to gain the upper hand in inter-Korean relations. The sixth issue area is energy security cooperation between the United States and South Korea in the civil nuclear sector, covered by Dr. James Platte. While energy security emerged as a critical aspect of

geopolitics after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Platte's article seeks to provide a roadmap for US–ROK cooperation in energy strategy. In the seventh article, Dr. Minsung Kim investigates the geopolitical implications of growing South Korea's soft power, recommending how Seoul ought to further promote *Hallyu*, a term referring to the success of South Korean popular culture in China, as a public good in its global agenda.

Finally, Maj Jessica René Taylor, USAFR, explains the challenges the US–ROK alliance faces in terms of regional contingency planning. After examining the obstacles to Seoul supporting US-led regional security cooperation, she argues for a more holistic approach with examples of evolving US security guarantees to economic retaliation and tech-centered alliance. She posits that such an approach will contribute to strengthening and expanding the alliance to meet South Korea's evolving regional threat environment more concretely.

This special issue aims to provide a list of potential strategic issues that deserves South Korea's attention in the long run, examine the current situation in Seoul, and explore potential challenges in these fields, which will eventually contribute to South Korea's stepping up as a global actor in the Indo-Pacific era.

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Notes

1. “북한 핵실험하면 신규 대북제재 재추진'... 미국의 경고,” *BBC Korean*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/>.
2. Robbie Gramer, “South Korea Is Turbocharging Its Arms Sales Business,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.
3. Some examples of countries that signed contracts include Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Senegal, Peru, Poland, Australia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, and so forth.
4. Kwon Hayoung, Lee Dongwoo, and Lee Junhyung, “‘美 이익 반하면 반도체도, 배터리도 없다’ [한중 공급망 진단-좌담회],” *아시아경제*, 9 June 2022, <https://view.asiae.co.kr/>.

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